



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION



Connecticut General Assembly
Education Committee
Testimony of Commissioner Dianna R. Wentzell
March 7, 2016

Good morning Senator Slossberg, Representative Fleischmann, Senator Boucher, Representative Lavielle and members of the Education Committee, I am Dianna Wentzell, Commissioner of the Department of Education, and I am pleased to have an opportunity to testify before you today regarding a series of important education-related proposals.

Raised Bill 5550, An Act Concerning Various Revisions And Additions To The Education Statutes

Section 1 of this bill requires the Department to send students' mastery examination scores to local and regional boards of education by no later than July 15th of each year. We must caution you that this is not a realistic timeline given the current testing window, which extends until mid-June. We do not expect to receive the final data until late-June or early July, which leaves insufficient time to calculate and validate the results before notifying districts. Distributing incorrect data is not something the Department wants to, or is willing to do; therefore, we would request that the deadline be changed to August 15th of each year.

Section 4 of this bill removes in-school suspensions that are greater than half a day from the list of what is considered an absence from school. We have heard from several districts about the many unintended consequences of including in-school suspensions of more than a half day as an absence, so the Department is in strong support of this change and thanks the committee for raising it.

Section 5 amends our current statutory requirement to submit several reports relating to the Commissioner's Network annually to now be due on September 15th of each year. While the Department is not opposed to a hard deadline for reporting, the September 15th deadline will not enable us to include any accountability index scores for the preceding year. We collect that data through the month of October, then calculate the indexes in the fall and release them to districts in January of the next year. If these reports are to be comprehensive and are to include the most recent data, the Department would request that this date be changed to February 1st of each year.

Section 13 pertains to the seizure of a student's phone by a school employee. The Department believes this proposal is preempted by existing federal constitutional law governing issues pertaining to search and seizure and could cause unnecessary confusion, so we are therefore opposed. There is already a well-developed body of constitutional law addressing student search and seizure under the Fourth Amendment. These legal principles trump state law and school officials and state and local police are already familiar with them. In an effort to increase student privacy, this proposal is also very vague and overly limits the ability of school personnel to conduct a reasonable search, or to take custody of a mobile device without searching it for reasonable periods of time to deal with disruption or distraction in the classroom.

measurements, we will be unable to fulfill our statutory obligations as well as our obligations to the children of our state. We will be unable to measure improvement and growth among our students from one year to the next. Furthermore it is not possible to produce a list of the top performing school districts that includes districts who have not achieved the minimum participation rate, as it makes comparisons among districts statistically unreliable. The Department feels very strongly that granting relief from having to comply with the minimum budget requirement should not apply to districts with high achievement gaps, graduation gaps, or low participation rates. Breaks from having to comply with funding requirements should not be given when they will be to the detriment of the very students who most need the resources.

Raised Bill 377, An Act Concerning The School Health Curriculum And Cancer Awareness

The Department does not believe that this added requirement for instruction in performing self-examinations for breast or testicular cancer is necessary. Currently, the Department requires students to have health assessments upon enrollment in the 6th or 7th grade and again in the 9th or 10th grade. These health assessment visits are appropriate opportunities for parents, along with their children, to discuss breast and testicular self-exams in a comprehensive way and in consideration of individual risk factors. Furthermore, cancer prevention is already included in the Healthy and Balanced Living Curriculum Framework created by the Department for use in districts. By making the cancer awareness requirement this prescriptive, the Department is concerned that adolescents performing self-exams could lead to false positives, resulting in unneeded stress and anxiety when the instances of breast and testicular cancer in adolescents is very low.

Raised Bill 378, An Act Concerning The Recommendation Of The High School Graduation Requirement Task Force.

The Department had representation on this task force and is in strong support of its recommendations, which align high school graduation requirements with the standards that have been adopted by the State Board of Education. We believe these recommendations will result in supporting our students to be college and career ready upon high school graduation, while also reducing the testing burden on our students by removing the requirement for specific end of course exams.

Raised Bill 379, An Act Concerning The Recommendations Of The Minority Teacher Recruitment Task Force

The Department believes very strongly in the goal of attracting and retaining high quality minority teachers in our schools. We have done a great deal of work in this area over the last several years through our Talent Office and we welcome an opportunity to continue to work with the legislature on this issue this session.